



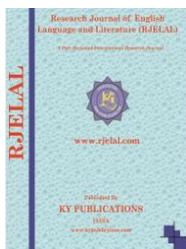
THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF LITERATURE

Dr.RAM PRAKASH PRADHAN

Associate Professor, Department of English

V.S.S.D.College, Kanpur

doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.74.29



ABSTRACT

Technically speaking, Literature is a superior written work that stands the test of time. It's a record of the development of human civilization. In its broadest sense any written work may be a form of literature. Literature may be classified according to whether it is fiction or non-fiction & whether it is poetry or prose. Again, literature is an artistic expression of the best that's known & thought in the world. It is a record of man's dreams & ideals, his hopes & aspirations, his failures & disappointments, his motives & passions

Literature covers a very wide range. Sometimes it is held to include everything that is printed in a book. Again, it is pointed out that something which is not printed in a book may also become real literature. Religious sermons exercise deep effect on the popular mind. They inspire the people and offer them solace and comfort. They may not be printed all the time but their nature is literary. On the other hand writers like Charles Lamb exclude the works of Hume and Gibbon from the field of literature and in that way they narrow its range. Further, there is the view of Hallam who includes jurisprudence, theology and medicine under the head of literature. In that way he makes the idea of literature very broad. We have to discover the path of golden mean out of these views for understanding the nature of literature.

Let us start with the assumption the every printed book is not literature. So many books are printed every year but they cannot reach the serene height of literature. As the scholars of literature have suggested we have to bear in mind the presence of two things in a piece of literature. We may say that only that writing may be called literature if it is of general human interest. In the second place in order

that a thing might be a piece of literature, it must yield aesthetic pleasure. A piece of literature differs from a treatise of astronomy, politics, medicine, philosophy and history. Books relating to them make an appeal to a particular class of readers and not to all men and women in general. Again, their aim is to impart knowledge and not to offer aesthetic pleasure. Thus, such books cannot come into the category of literature.

In this context De Quincey, a great critic and writer draws a distinction between two types of literature. According to him literature may be divided into two parts, the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. The function of the first is to teach and the function of the second is to move. The first serves didactic purpose and the second bears aesthetic purpose. The first is a mixed literature and the second is pure literature. Whenever we talk of literature we always mean literature of power and not literature of knowledge. The literature of power includes fine arts such as poetry and drama.

It has been pointed out that true literature or the literature of power does not teach at all. What do we learn from "Paradise Lost"? The answer is that

we learn nothing at all. What do we learn from a cookery book? The answer is that we learn something new in every para which we had not learnt before. Thomas De Quincey puts the question, "But would you therefore put the wretched cookery-book on a higher level of estimation than the divine poem? What you owe to Milton is not any knowledge..... what you owe is power." Thus, the Miltonic epic which is representative literature gives us power. The same critic advances his idea further and says that literature of knowledge may carry us further on the same plain but it can never raise us one foot above the level of the earth. The literature of power has got an ascending power and it makes us enjoy a flight into the realm of delight where the earth is forgotten. Whenever we talk of literature, our range is limited to literature of power.

Literature of power or real literature feeds on human life. Life is the basic foundation of literature. Literature and life are inextricably intertwined. A great book grows directly out of life. In reading it we are brought in close relation with human life.

"Literature is the vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is thus fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language." (Hudson)

Aronld also makes an approach to literature in the same manner. For him poetry is a criticism of life. Poetry being the representative part of literature, literature also becomes a criticism of life. The literary artist is a critic of life. He is a spectator of life and he is also an interpreter of life.

"The essayist is the opposite of the romancer.... The essayist, then, is in his particular fashion an interpreter of life, a critic of life. He does not see life as the historian or as the philosopher, or as the poet, or as the novelist, and yet he has a touch of all these. He ..."

He is not concerned with discovering a theory of life. His method is analytical. He observes

life and records it just as it appears to him. He lets his fancy play over the glimpses of life.

Literature is a form of artistic creation and as such it is both a criticism and an idealization of life. The literary man is not an imitator of life. He is not the follower of photographic reality of life. He presents life as it appears to him.

"Literature always anticipates life, it does not copy it but moulds it to its purpose." (Oscar Wilde)

Literature is an artistic expression of the best that is known and thought in the world. It is a record of man's dreams and ideals, his hopes and aspirations, his failures and disappointments, his motives & passions. It knows no nationality or boundary except that of humanity. It is occupied with elementary human passions and emotions such as love, hatred, joy, sorrow, fear and faith. It reflects these human emotions in a natural manner.

From the ancient days down to the present there have been two important views regarding the function of literature. According to the first view literature ought to be aesthetic in its nature and character. It must confer delight on man. According to the second literature ought to be moralistic and didactic. It must bear a moral purpose and it must serve society by making men better citizens. Plato, the first great critic of art, was governed by the moral purpose of literature. For him the question of the relation of art and morality was supreme. In his opinion poetry and drama were immoral because they watered and fed human passions. They were not capable of making better citizens. The poets were liars and they represented Greek gods in a wrong manner. They represented them as revengeful, lustful & cruel. They put bad examples of the vices and weaknesses of the gods before the people. Thus, their literature exercised corrupt influences on the people. Hence, the poets and the dramatists could not find a place in the "Republic" of Plato. Plato stood on the side of the moralists and he banished poetry and drama from his state because they conflicted with morality.

Sir Philip Sidney during the middle age faced the same problem of art and morality from the side

of the Puritans. The puritans regarded poetry an evil and immoral thing. Sidney pleaded that poetry was not the evil thing it was supposed to be but on the contrary it was consistent with correct religion. He wrote a treatise on poetry "An Apology for Poetry". In this essay he expressed the view that poetry is not useless and its reading is not a waste of time. It is also not "the mother of lies." It is because the poet "nothing affirms and therefore, he never lieth." In the opinion of Sidney art must instruct as well as delight. In the epics of Spenser there is combination of moral virtues and aesthetic beauty. The poet performs both the functions. He presents the best example of morality in the person of King Arthur. At the same time Spenser offers delight to the reader by his sensuous poetry. In Shakespeare there is a fine presentation of human life, its joy, sorrow, weaknesses and moral strength. Shakespeare holds the mirror up to life. He does not preach anything. He shows that life is like that.

During the 17th century Milton follows the art of poetry for moral purpose. He expresses his aim in the beginning of the epic "Paradise Lost." He wants to "justify the ways of God to man." He shows that man is originally a sinner and his deliverance is possible only through his prayer to Christ. The poems of Milton are full of moral aims and purpose. Dryden, the father of English criticism, holds the view that delight is the primary aim of poetry and instruction is only its secondary function. He says that poetry instructs only as it delights. Dr. Johnson during the 18th century believed that "poetry must be by a rule didactic." He says that poetry must give pleasure but it must also have truth. He has all praises for Milton's "Paradise Lost" for it is essentially a moral poem.

Among the romantic poets Wordsworth upheld the moralistic view of art. He insisted that a poet should propagate the moral and spiritual values of life. He says, "I should like to be known as a teacher or nothing else." The poetry of Wordsworth is moralistic and didactic in tone. Keats was purely an artist and for him poetry was a need in itself. It appeared to him that his friend Shelley was going beyond the end of poetry and therefore, he wrote a letter to him, "you, I am sure, will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your

magnanimity and be more of an artist and 'load every rift' of your subject with ore." In the opinion of Keats art should have no "palpable design", the artist should aim at creating beauty in his work of art. He should not be a reformer and a moral preacher. The artist is above everything. He is not bound by the idea of any morality or any duty to society. "Ode To A Nightingale" is an example of pure art and pure poetry. The poet reveals the misery of human life and he builds a romantic land in order to get rid of that.

During the Victorian age Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde came out as the two major prophets of English aestheticism. For Pater art is no longer the servant. It is the master. The activity of art is an end in itself. Art is not a means to some ultimate end, it is complete in itself. He judges a work of art by the impression it makes on him and not by any rules or set standard. The mind of the critic must be free from the tyranny of mere theories. The appreciation of art cannot be reduced to fixed principles, it is a matter of temper. Thus, Pater stands on the side of the artist and not on the side of moralist. He is an exponent of the aesthetic movement. Oscar Wilde follows the principle art for art's sake. Oscar Wilde remarked- "There is no such thing as moral or immoral. Books are well written or badly written, that is all."

In contrast to Pater and Wilde there are two eminent Victorians Arnold and Ruskin. They stand by the moralists. In his essay on Wordsworth, Arnold says that "a poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life, a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life." Ruskin is a strong supporter of morality in the realm of art. For him art is superbly moral. It is of divine origin. It is the glory of God. All fine arts must be didactic to the people and morality is their chief end. The function of the artist is to teach nobility. The artist is the servant of God. He is by nature a moral man. His function is to make men better.

In modern age art is regarded as a social product. Therefore, it must express the problems of society. From this point of view the function of literature is to express the hopes and aspirations of

society. It must represent the feelings of the downtrodden and the destitutes. Art is not a luxury of the intellectuals. It is the voice of the common people. To sum up Art should not be a vehicle of idea. It should not be a means of propaganda. The artist must present a picture of life. He should not make a comment on that. That is the function the moralist. Art is superior to morality. "The function of the moralist is to exhort, the function of the artist is to exhibit." The aim of the moralist is to influence action, the aim of the artist is to awaken perception. To quote Romain Rolland "The first and the paramount duty of the artist and the intellectual is to be true to his inner call and urge." He must keep the lamp burning in the shrine of inner perception. After doing it his surplus time and energy may be devoted to the betterment of social conditions. This is what the great artists like Goethe have done.

We may conclude in the words of R.A. Scott-James, "Literature, as regarded by a Schlegel or a Taine, is a social product. It is circulated, or stored, for the use of all who desire to help themselves from the sum-total of finished thought-work available in men's writing. All the parts of it are food for the mind, and collectively constitute world culture. When Coleridge said that "no man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher," he was not confusing two different faculties of the mind; but he was affirming the importance of the one to the other. The poet, he said, was one who had "first studied patiently, meditated deeply, and understood minutely, till knowledge, become habitual and intuitive, wedded itself to his habitual feelings." (337)

Works Cited

Hudson, W.H. *An Outline History of English Literature*
B.I. Publications Pvt b Ltd New Delhi 1998

Scott-James, R.A. *The Making of Literature* Allied
Publishers Limited, New Delhi 1996